



State of Wisconsin
Department of Public Instruction
Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

GUEST EDITORIAL

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CONTACT: Patrick Gasper, Communications Officer, (608) 266-3559

School Safety Week is October 19 to 25

By State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster

Talking about school safety can bring to mind catastrophic incidents. Columbine and Cazenovia are riveting examples of school-related violence that we fear, and rightly so.

Each time we face such tragedy, there is a sense of urgency to protect our children. Fortunately, many school communities have mobilized school safety resources before terrible events unfold. Such was the case at Green Bay's East High School when a student spoke up about threats of violence. The safety plan worked. Tragedy was averted. During the national observance of School Safety Week, Oct. 19 to 25, each school and community is asked to take steps to ensure student safety and well-being and to make school safety part of everyday life.

School safety requires planning. It requires the attention and focus of educators, law enforcement personnel, and policymakers as well as students, parents, and community residents. School safety is more than a one-day exercise or a safety plan review; it must be woven into the culture of each school and community. Safety in our schools requires conscious acts to open lines of communication and instill responsibility among students, parents, teachers, administrators, and the community.

While horrific headlines grab our attention, these types of incidents are really quite rare. Less than 1 percent of student injuries are attributed to physical violence at school. The smaller acts of violence such as verbal taunting, shunning, bullying, or sexual harassment are much more common. These negative actions create a toxic climate that impairs students' ability to learn. Our schools must be respectful environments where children are physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe to learn, make mistakes, and grow toward adulthood. This comes from a comprehensive school safety plan that removes

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barriers to student achievement. Schools can learn more about a broad range of school safety issues through the School Crisis Preparedness and Safe Schools webcast series, sponsored by the Department of Public Instruction and other state agencies and safety organizations. Visit <http://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/index.html> for more information.

Violence-prevention programs do make a difference in the safety of a school. Comprehensive, high-quality school safety programs lead to increased attendance and more students making the honor roll. To be successful, the prevention program must send a strong message against violence, aggression, and bullying; provide teacher training; create a positive school climate; and include family, peers, media, and the community.

The DPI developed bullying-prevention guides for both elementary and middle school students. The guides, sent to each school district last school year, help students learn to deal with bullying and how to develop skills to build a bully-free school. Unfortunately, federal funding to support this and other violence-prevention activities has been cut repeatedly. The proposed federal budget for 2009 would reduce Safe and Drug-Free Schools funding to Wisconsin schools by 75 percent from 2001 levels.

This is why my 2009-11 budget request includes provisions for school safety. The proposal would provide funding for competitive grants that would allow schools to purchase security equipment, pay for school safety personnel and mental health services, and address truancy issues. These grants would fill gaps in other school safety efforts to enhance the security and safety of our students.

Our children are our future. We must create schools where students feel and give respect; where bullying, harassment, and violence are absent; and where young people are safe to learn. During School Safety Week, let's work together to ensure the safety of our schools.

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Elizabeth Burmaster is the elected state superintendent of public instruction.

NOTES: Additional information about student violence is available in the Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey <http://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/yrbsindx.html>. A high-resolution photo of the state superintendent is available on the Department of Public Instruction "Media Contacts and Resources" webpage at <http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/vm-media.html>. This editorial is available electronically at http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/pdf/dpi2008_153.pdf.